DAWN

# OPINION

# Regime change redux

THE world is witnessing a dangerous revival of regime-change politics. For quite a while, US President Donald Trump had been issuing blunt statements regarding the Venezuelan leadership, framing its policies and even existence as a threat to regional stability. Last weekend, he made good on his implied threats by sending US forces into the Latin American nation to forcibly bring its president to the US. Nicol s Maduro has since been paraded on US streets, on his way to face US justice: the head of a sovereign nation reduced to a war trophy for the American president. It is an extraordinary development that cannot be viewed merely through the lens of South American politics. Rather, it represents the unapologetic revival of regime-change tactics by a major global power, and raises the question: what remains of the so-called 'rules-based order' when the sovereignty of nations has been reduced to a conditional privilege?

The US has a long history of intervention in South America, often driven by the protection of corporate interests rather than any genuine commitment to democratic ideals. During the Cold War era, it used the fear of communism to justify supporting authoritarian regimes that had aligned themselves with US economic priorities. The rhetoric has shifted since then. Today, in the US leadership's discourse around Venezuela and its neighbouring states, there is reduced emphasis on ideology and an increased focus on resources, specifically oil and minerals. Regime change has thus been turned into a tool for appropriation and exploitation. There seems to be no shame in it either. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently declared, "I do not care what the UN says. The UN does not know what they're talking about." He had been challenged on the repeated claim that Venezuela was involved in the drug trade. In short, the US will now act as judge, jury and executioner.

The silence of the international community has been equally disconcerting. There has been a very muted or fragmented response from the UN and major powers that claim to defend multilateralism. Some have even gone so far as to endorse the overthrow of the Maduro government. Others have issued mealy-mouthed condemnations and meek appeals to adhere to the UN Charter. This lack of pushback contrasts sharply with the swift condemnations seen from the same nations in other geopolitical contexts, where the aggressor is not the US or one of its allies. This selective outrage will further erode the credibility and moral authority of the global order. The sovereignty of every nation must be respected, regardless of which political system they employ. If this simple principle cannot be honoured in practice, the international order cannot survive long. Interventions like the one in Venezuela cannot be countenanced. The world must speak up.

# Rivers held hostage

INDIA'S claim that it has placed the Indus Waters Treaty "in abeyance" is not just provocative, it is legally meaningless. As Pakistan's Indus Waters Commissioner has noted, international law does not recognise such a concept. Treaties are either in force, suspended by mutual consent, lawfully terminated, or breached. What New Delhi has tried to invent is a legal grey zone that does not exist. The IWT, brokered by the World Bank in 1960, is designed to ensure that water disputes between Pakistan and India are insulated from political crises. It endured the 1965 and 1971 wars, the Kargil conflict, and decades of hostility because its drafters recognised that water could not be held hostage to politics. That principle is written into the treaty itself, which lays out clear, binding procedures for resolving disputes. India's April 2025 move followed the deadly Pahalgam attack in occupied Kashmir, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan without producing publicly verifiable evidence. Using that incident to justify suspending cooperation under a water treaty crosses a dangerous line.

Global response has not favoured India's position. In June, the Permanent Court of Arbitration made clear that India has no legal authority to unilaterally hold the IWT in abeyance. Foreign legal experts and policy analysts have warned that weaponising water disputes risks setting a dangerous precedent, especially in a climate-stressed region. Pakistan's response has been firm but measured. Officials have warned that any attempt to obstruct Pakistan's lawful water share would amount to an act of war. That may seem a strong phrase, but it is one rooted in reality. The western rivers are not a bargaining chip. They sustain agriculture, power generation and livelihoods for millions. Any disruption, even under the guise of 'non-cooperation', carries existential implications. Equally worrying is India's pattern of procedural obstruction, such as delaying data sharing, bypassing agreed forums, and seeking to reframe technical disputes as political leverage. Such conduct erodes trust not only between Islamabad and New Delhi, but also among international guarantors who see the IWT as a model for transboundary water governance. Pakistan is right to pursue a legal and diplomatic course. The goal is not confrontation, but compliance. Treaties exist to restrain power, not to be reinterpreted at will. At a time of climate stress, the IWT remains vital. But only if its rules are respected.

# Marathon spirit

THE rising trend of distance-running in the country was on full display at the Karachi Marathon held on Sunday. Thousands of people of every age, gender and background took part, some of them competitive runners and others there for the experience. In a boost for the organising committee, the sponsors of the World Athletics-accredited event — whose distance is certified by the Association of International Marathons and Distance Races — announced they would sponsor the men's and women's winners — Israr Khattak and Sara Lodhi respectively — to participate in the London Marathon this year. The move is aimed at boosting the international profile of local athletes while putting Pakistan on the global distance-running map. The organisers and sponsors should be lauded for their efforts. The Karachi Marathon has risen from humble beginnings and very little support to holding its third edition. Indeed, the event would be more representative of the city if its route included landmark monuments. Up until now, it has been limited to loops around the city's most affluent housing scheme. But it was heartening to note that race director Shoaib Nizami acknowledged in the lead-up to the event that next year's edition will encompass a greater part of the city, with Mayor Murtaza Wahab offering full support from the KMC and the government to ensure that that happens.

While such a move would project the real vibrancy of Karachi to the world, for now, at the very least, and with the event becoming a regular fixture in the sporting calendar, it has galvanised the passion for distance-running in the city and beyond. Not only is it promoting healthy activity, with so many people actively taking part, it is also offering a chance for the country's talent to project itself. It has essentially started a movement and the hope is that one day it can propel an athlete from Pakistan to the very pinnacle of distance-running: a world or an Olympic title.

BY ARIFA NOOR

# Done with politics

It seems as if all the political soap opera plot twists have been done, and talked about, to death.

THE new year is a mere few days old but 2026 already promises to be more exhausting than its predecessor. The mortals among us — and who have friends to party with — had barely recovered from New Year's Eve when the US's Nobel Peace Prize aspirant invaded a country and kidnapped its president.

Hardly new stuff for those who remember Iraq, or Panama, or … the list can be rather long. But it was a wee bit surprising, coming from a president who can't stop listing the number of wars he has stopped. What stopped journos in their tracks was the president's failure to invoke either the fruits of democracy or the freedoms of brown oppressed people, especially women. There were no such helpful diversions. The oil will help the US, it was proclaimed. Now where does that leave the likes of us who want to shake their heads in despair and explain the limitations of nation-building exercises? The world and its craziness is forcing commentators out of a job faster than one can say AI.

It is no easier in Pakistan.

How does one make sense of an authoritarian interlude in which no dollars are flowing in? After all, we are trained to analyse the power flowing down the barrel of a gun that has dollar signs painted on it. However, without the dollars, it seems a bit uncertain and unstable (and it has been for quite a few years now,) but it is hard to figure out how long it will last. The 10-year pendulum surely doesn't cut it anymore. But what ready analysis can replace this? No one knows.

So the state is hardening and it rules with an iron glove. Yet it has not been able to tame the people entirely. The anger may not be expressed as loudly as it once was, but no one can ignore the simmering. As a result, the PTI is still a force and so is Imran Khan. On top of this, he refuses to go into exile. What a pain he is because if he left for foreign climes, it would be so easy to believe the *khatam shud* predictions of some of the commentariat.

In other words, the nail-biting contest threatens to continue in 2026 and those of us in the business of analysis have little left to say. Truly. There are just so many times one can predict doom and gloom and ask everyone to talk for the greater good. Because frankly, our leadership just isn't as honest as the chap in the US; our lot claims to worry about the people here and it's a story that no one buys now and yet they continue to tell it. They know that no one buys it; we know that they know that we know they don't care and yet the drama continues. And now no one is listening.

It seems as if all the political soap opera plot twists have been done and talked about to death. Take another example. The predictions about the democratic DNA in Nawaz Sharif or Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari coming to the fore are now also becoming less common. It's been months since anyone has spoken of Sharif senior's desire to see Imran Khan free and nearly years since anyone has spoken of the tensions between father Zardari and son Bhutto-Zardari and the latter struggling to break free. No one is now expecting the true democrats to say 'enough' and hiding their disappointment analysts speak of the choices in Pakistan being limited to authoritarianism and fascism.

No different is all the 'sane' talk about talks. It's about as promising as the MoUs Pakistan signs each time a foreign leader meets a government official or the promises about the economy taking off. No one can even be bothered to argue about it. And neither does anyone think 2026 will bring any change, so great is the 'paralysis'. Though I have learnt that one can call it *jamood* on the talk show.

Even the soothsayers or *najoomis* who were called to talk shows while the rest of us were making New Year plans had nothing new to offer. They seem to sound no different from the political soothsayers who tell us of the greatness that awaits the country in 2026. The king is in his counting house and the prime minister is having bread and honey. And the rest are stuck hanging out clothes in their backyard while the FBR is pecking noses and far more.

The point here is that there is nothing new to say about the state of the nation, the society and what passes for politics. It is now beyond us all, be it the *najoomis* or the analysts. And don't let anyone tell you otherwise. But because we too have to pay taxes and then the bills which have more taxes within them, this column has to be written week after week.

So it might just happen that soon this space turns into something rather different. Instead of Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan and others, it might just make sense to write on middle-age challenges such as trying to lose weight or deal with acidity; cooking; the painful watching options on Netflix; or even an agony aunt section. Anything at the moment seems more possible than writing on politics. The latter, even politicians assure me, is done and dusted. Which reminds me, what about a styling column for politicians? Many of them, especially the men, can do with a makeover. What is this love affair with Kala Kola, for instance? Why not go for sophisticated grey streaks?

If there are better ideas out there for what a weekly column can be about, suggestions are welcome. For I have taxes to pay before I sleep. Miles of taxes … with apologies to Robert Frost. ■

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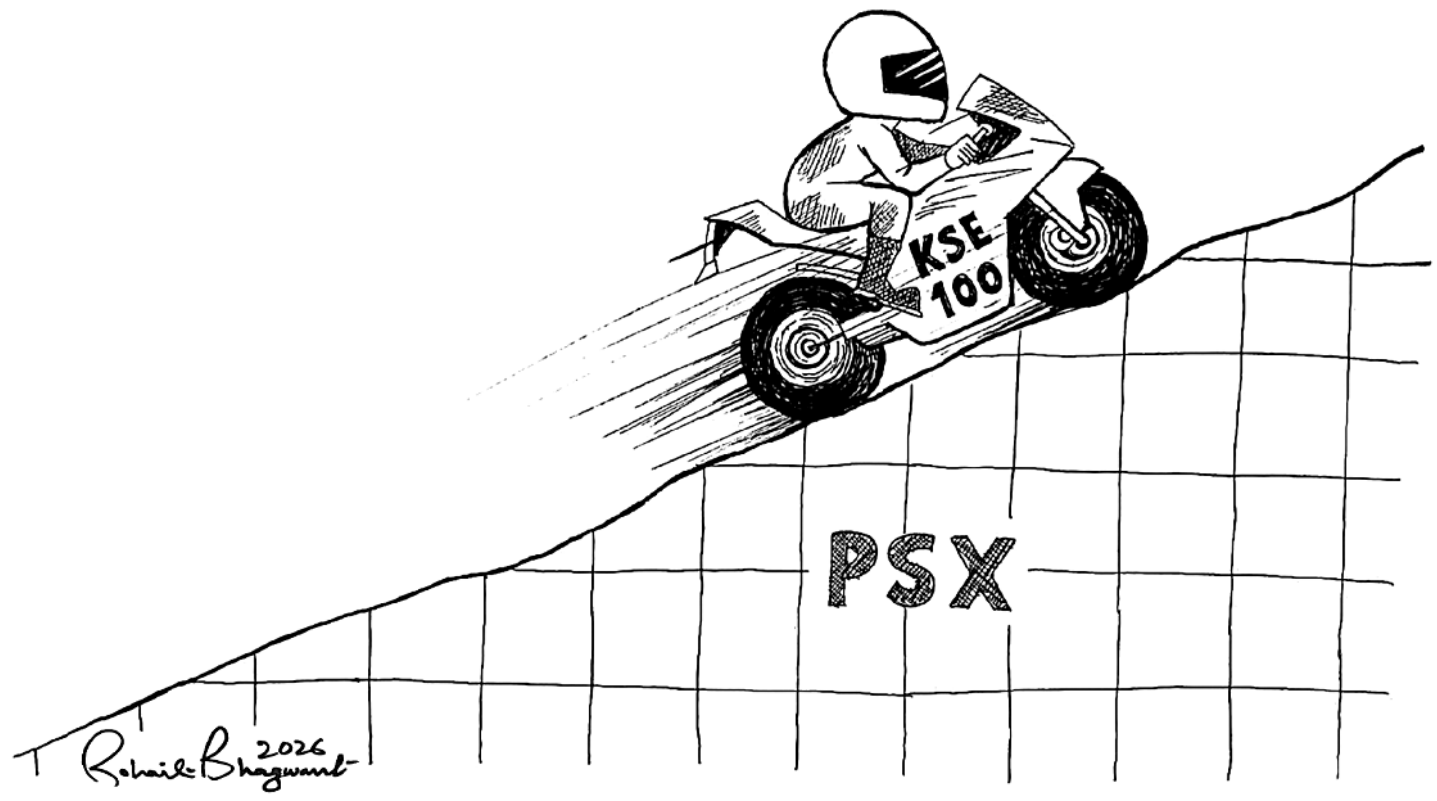

BY JAWED NAQVI

# Trump's overplayed hand

IT'S useful to know the lay of the land that Donald Trump sought to breach with the kidnapping of Venezuelan president Nicol s Maduro. Is there a power vacuum after Maduro's exit? Evidently not. Will the Bolivarian republic crumble before the firepower of America? Unlikely, in view of the fact that too much Russian, Chinese and Iranian investment has gone into buttressing Bolivarian rule for it to be easily scuttled. Remember that Hugo Ch vez was also kidnapped in a coup staged by the CIA. But his people rallied and Ch vez returned to lead the country until his mysterious early death. Tariq Ali, in his memoirs, *You Can't Please All* has a chapter on his meetings with Ch vez and Maduro. It's titled 'Was Hugo Ch vez murdered?' There's a distinct possibility his cancer was induced.

The story, however, is about Donald Trump's fear of BRICS and his suspicion of the Bolivarian revolution Ch vez launched after his electoral victory in Venezuela in 1998. This has irked the West. In this sense, the story hasn't really moved forward since the Anglo-American Operation Ajax toppled Mohammad Mosaddegh's elected government in Iran in 1953. That was about oil. Last week's kidnapping of Maduro is also about oil even if the Trump administration is rowing back from its claim of running Venezuela.

What role is BRICS playing to worry Trump, so much so that two key BRICS members, Iran and Venezuela, are in America's constant crosshairs? They are both heavily sanctioned countries. With BRICS becoming a cohesive financial and economic platform, the hold of sanctions as a tool of US coercion would most likely be rendered ineffective, a key worry for the US.

Ch vez's Bolivarian revolution needs to be understood nicely for a good reason. Ch vez leaned heavily on Sim n Bol var's ideals of Latin American unity, sovereignty, and anti-imperialism. Sim n Bol var was the 19th-century liberator who led South America's independence from Spain. However, dozens of roads and landmarks in the US and other Western countries are named after Bol var. Chavez plotted something else.

Nehru inaugurated a Sim n Bol var Road in Delhi's diplomatic enclave in 1955. Bol var inspired Nehru's Non-aligned Movement and Third World solidarity. To the right-wing Narendra Modi government, the road would be an embarrassment. It was evident in the foreign ministry's tame response to Trump's attack on a BRICS country. "Recent developments in Venezuela are a matter of deep concern. We are closely monitoring the evolving situation." Thus spake the BRICS host for later this year. In neighbouring Bangladesh, people took to the streets to protest the heist.

Trump has strong reasons to want to oust the Bolivarian republic. Ch vez rewrote the constitution that established new rights, strengthened the executive, and allowed for re-election. Funded by oil revenue, he launched vast social programmes targeting poverty. These included free community healthcare, staffed initially by Cuban doctors; a massive literacy campaign; a mission for subsidised food, housing, and university education. A Qadhafi-like irritant but in the Western hemisphere, a challenge to the Monroe Doctrine.

> We don't know how many Venezuelans were killed. But there was resistance.

In his adventurous attack on Venezuela, Trump looked like a quack dressed as a handyman assigned the task of staunching America's slide as a Great Power. His bombing raids on seven nations last year defined his view of Pax Americana. His targets were Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Syria, Nigeria, Somalia and Venezuela. For all that and more, including the supervision of Israeli genocide of Palestinians, he demanded the Nobel Peace Prize, which went instead to a female Venezuelan dissenter who Trump cheered first but has distanced himself from after last week's removal of Maduro to New York. Seymour Hersh noted that the bombings were inflicted without significant complaint from the Republican-led Congress.

Easily the most significant concern for the US is the Venezuelan state taking control of key sectors of oil, telecommunications, electricity, steel, and cement. The constitution is committed to the redistribution of large, unused estates to peasants. Currency and price controls are implemented to combat capital flight and inflation, though they also contributed to economic distortions. Venezuela under Ch vez/Maduro pursued Latin American integration outside US influence, promoting the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America and offering subsidised oil for Caribbean nations. The revolution aimed to fundamentally transform Venezuelan society, moving it away from the neoliberal, two-party system that had dominated since 1958 and towards a model of '21st century socialism'.

As usual, the news about the dangerous military intervention was used to highlight American intelligence and military prowess instead. Stories were circulated about the derring-do of the elite Delta Force commandos who seized Maduro and his wife by bombing their way into his heavily guarded palace. However, Cuba is mourning the death of 32 Cuban guards who were protecting the first family. They were killed in the air and ground mission. We don't know how many Venezuelans were killed. But there was resistance, and that resistance is believed to be the signal for a rehearsed plan to turn a swoop on Venezuelan resources into a nightmare for Trump.

Sensing the resistance, Trump threatened Venezuela's vice president, Delcy Rodr guez, with the fate of her president. Tapped to take control of the country after Maduro's removal to the US, Rodr guez has claimed that the operation to arrest him had a "Zionist tinge". She warned that "the extremists who have promoted armed aggression against our country — history and justice will make them pay".

What role could Israel have played in the assault on a distant country? Not very different from the role that Iran has as a strategic ally of Bolivarian Venezuela. Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Sa'ar was quick to congratulate Trump, saying the US "acted as the leader of the free world". But Trump's ties with Israel have split his MAGA base. As he struggles to keep his majority in both Houses of Congress in polls due in November, Trump may have overplayed his hand in using the military to fix runaway domestic challenges. ■

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